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**“LADY MACBETH OF MTSENSK DISTRICT”: A TALE WAVED
ON A TERRIFIC NATURAL SCENARY**

Fusco A.

The young Katerina Lvovna lives in a house with an old husband she does not love and her father-in-law, missing the freedom of her childhood. The deathly oppressive atmosphere of her family will change when she meets Sergei. Her passion for the young man, who had seduced many women in the town, will be so strong that Katerina will do anything to keep hold of him. The two lovers will commit monstrous crimes together and will be convicted and sent to Siberia. The tale is a dramatic portrait of a dragging force, which moves in an intense atmosphere of heat and coldness flowing in the deepest darkness.

Keywords: Nikolai Leskov, Lady Makbeth of Mtsensk District, Russian literature, the Enchanted Wanderer, essay.

**«ЛЕДИ МАКБЕТ МЦЕНСКОГО УЕЗДА»:
РАЗВИТИЕ ИСТОРИИ В ЕСТЕСТВЕННЫХ УСЛОВИЯХ**

Фуско А.

Юная Катерина Львовна живет в доме старика мужа, которого она не любит, и его отца. Ей не хватает той свободы, которой она обладала, будучи ребенком. Смертельная атмосфера деспотии в ее жизни меняется со встречей Сергея. Ее страсть к мужчине, соблазнившему всех женщин города, будет такой сильной, что Катерина постарается сделать все, чтобы удержать его. Любовники совершат жуткое преступление, за что будут сосланы в Сибирь. Эта история – драматичное изображение силы, открывающей самые глубины темной человеческой души.

Ключевые слова: Николай Лесков, Леди Макбет Мценского уезда, русская литература, Очарованный странник, очерк.

Introduction

Nikolai Leskov is a famous Russian story-teller of nineteenth century. He used the narrative form to tell about real life, reporting events sometimes “so touching, so horrible insofar as they effect the hero of the drama and with denouement so unusual that it could only have happened in Russia” [1, p. 323]. The author attracts furthermore the reader’s attention on his story-telling saying that “there is not one iota of invention in his story” [1, p. 323].

Leskov, as “the enchanted wanderer”, follows the intricate paths of a multitude of events, and reveals the deepest secrets hidden along the way with all the “forthrightness of his simple soul” [1, p. 236]. He looks for answers to questions about hard themes such as life/suicide, duty/guilt, natural/supernatural, good/evil, dream/nightmare, sacred/profane, cleverness/stupidity, wonderful/horrible, joy/evil.

Past, Present and future are a *unique* time on which the story is waved and its readers can belong to past, present, future generations. Moreover, as for the place where the story takes place, it might be everywhere in the world not only in Russia. Leskov’s stories are universal both for time and space collocation.

And yet the story-teller as the *enchanted wanderer*, cannot give further answers to deep questions “he fell into a quite meditation which none of his fellow-passengers dared interrupt by further questions” [1, p. 236]. No whole truth can be revealed clearly by “the learned and wise” [1, p. 236]. Sometimes only simple and sincere souls such as children can understand God’s intentions: “as for his prophecies, they remain in the hands of the one whose works are hidden from the learned and the wise and are at times revealed to babes and suck-lings” [1, p. 236].

The endless debate on the mystery of life remains open but the reader can enjoy the pleasure of introducing himself/herself into a passionate, terrific, wonderful , fantastic narrative world painted by Leskov’s great creative genius.

The prologue

Katerina Lvovna is a twenty-four year old young woman coming from a poor family, married to a merchant over fifty, Zinovy Borisich. They had no children and the old Boris Timofeych Izmailov, Katerina’s father in law, lived with them. The

portrait of Katerine, with “such a lively nature used to simplicity and freedom” [1, p. 12] is framed on the scenery of the “merchant’s cloister like house with its wall and savage dogs running loose” [1, p. 12]. Five long years had passed since she had enjoyed her happy days running “down to the river with her buckers, bathing in her shift under the landing stage, or throw sunflower seed husks at any young fellow who passed her gate” [1, p. 12]. Time had rolled on in solitude, with an “unloving husband” [1, p. 11] and her father in law, submitted to their orders and humiliated for being considered even a “barren” [1, p. 12]. Silence, emptiness, monotony wrapped her as a “canary in a cage” [1, p. 18].

The author presents the “prologue” of a “terrible drama” introducing its hero, Katerina Lvovna Izmailova, as “Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District”, since it was “by that name that she was known afterwards known among the local gentry” [1, p. 11].

In the sixth spring of her married life, the second chapter of Katerina Lvovna’s story starts when she meets a “young fellow” [1, p. 21] named Sergey who will open the way to a possible change in her present miserable life.

Nature: a mirror of lights and shadows in human soul

Leskov reveals all his art in painting natural scenes using as colours a rich variety of words and creative expressions to report human feelings on surface. Words such as “paradise” [1, p. 26], “heaven” [1, p. 26], “ecstasy” [1, p. 26], “full bright moon” [1, p. 26], “Golden night” [1, p. 27], attracts the reader’s sensibility and transfer him/her into a world where simple natural entities figure as they were alive:

“The moonlight slanted down through the leaves and blossoms making whimsical colored patterns that flickered over the face and body of Katerina Lvovna... a faint, warm breeze stirred the sleepy leaves... the grass seemed to be playing in moonlight, broken into checkered patches by the leaves and flowers of trees. The grass was all turned to gold by those dainty patches of light that flickered and quivered as though they were living...” [1, p. 27].

Anyway, the joyful picture of the two lovers in communion with nature is shadowed by “a breath of something languid, inducing idleness, voluptuousness and dark desires” [1, p. 27]. Nature is like a mirror where past and present are projected

towards an unknown future with all fears, anxieties and troubles. The natural background of the scene in which Katerina “bathed in moonlight and rolling on the soft carpet” [1, p. 31] fades gradually. Time rolls on quickly “the white flowers kept falling, falling, from the old apple-until at last they ceased to fall... the short summer night had passed, the moon hid itself behind the steep, high roofs of the warehouses...” [1, p. 31]. Time was over for the two lovers’ game who were “kissing and fondling...whispering and soft laughter, as though mischievous children where conferring together how best to make fun of an old man...” [1, p. 31].

The joyful natural atmosphere fades away and the old scenery opens on the stage where Katerina and Sergei are walking back home “across the silent, deathly silent merchant yard” [1, p. 31].

The obscure sides of inner conflicts

Passion and torment are both part of life. It was a night terribly hot, when Katerina was resting together with Sergey in “her husband’s high bed” [1, p. 22]. “The frisky flies were a perfect torment” [1, p. 23]. She felt “exhausted” [1, p. 23]. Her physical sufferance is accompanied by a terrible nightmare personified in the shape of a cat. “And that cat was rubbing itself against them, between her and Sergei, such a wonderful, big grey cat, as fat as can be, with gorgeous whiskers” [1, p. 24]. She wonders “Is it really a cat or what?” [1, p. 24]. Luckily at first “her fright drove the dream and the sleepiness away” [1, p. 24] and she felt safe again next to her lover Sergei.

Later, “The queer old cat” visited Katerine again and again revealing its identity: the obsessive presence of old Boris Timofeyich coming from the graveyard had never left Katerine. She stayed immobile in front of the force of her nightmare, she could not move: “Katerina Lvovna wanted to get up but her sleeping arms and legs would not obey her; and the cat walked up and down her whole body... And shivers ran over her whole body” [1, p. 22]. The artist uses all his creativity in painting the picture of the terrific *entity* between the two lovers: “This cat had the head of Boris Timofeyich, full size, and instead of eyes there were two circles of fire that kept turning and turning in different directions” [1, p. 33].

Nonetheless, Katerina was no more “the timid woman of the past” [1, p. 23], she was determined to defend her possessive love for Sergey “she would not let Sergei live her side for a moment” [1, p. 23]. No nightmare could overcome her determination; she was not a prey for all obstacles she might find on the way towards her future life. She could not feel “pity” for her husband but only an “evil joy” [1, p. 34].

Sergey represented her future and an obscure passion dragged her towards him, the centre of her universe: “For Sergei’s sake she was now prepared to go through fire and water, into prison or on the cross. He had made her so much in love with himself that there was no limit to her loyalty to him” [1, p. 31]. She was a slave of his and had changed her simple, remissive nature into a wild one as a “viper” as her husband called her: “What are you doing, you viper” [1, p. 38]. She reveals all her cruelty accumulated in years of oppressive status and expresses it with attitudes of real sadism: “Katerina Lvovna laughed and kissed Sergei passionately right in front of her husband” [1, p. 38].

Katerina, Lady Macbeth of remote times, is animated by an obscure force that let her eliminate all obstacles to achieve her objectives. The little bird in the cage, a prey to a “melancholy that had dulled her brain” [1, p. 12] for long five years had become a “prey” of evil forces to destroy all that was against her plans. “It seemed as though demons had broken loose from their chains and she fell prey to her former thoughts of the wrong this boy was doing her...” [1, p. 46]. She was obsessed by her inevitable suffering to fulfil her objectives. “She always had the same thing on her mind... How much I have suffered, how many sins I have to answer for” [1, p. 45].

Memories of past freedom, passion, torment, evil joy, sins are all mixed in Katerina’s soul and the conflict between good and evil is transferred even on a sacral field. The third crime has on the scene Katerina’s little nephew while he is reading “The lives of the Christian Fathers” [1, p. 46]. The time is “The Presentation of the Blessed Vergin Mother” [1, p. 46] the little boy is concentrated in the reading of “The life of Theodore, the Soldier of God... He served God well” [1, p. 49].

In a short time, only four minutes, a new crime is committed on a scene of terror animated by the most obscure forces: "The windows rattled, the floor shook, the vibrating chains of the hanging icon lamps cast fantastic shadows on the walls" [1, p. 50]. "It seemed as though some unearthly forces were shaking the sinful house to the foundations" [1, p. 50].

The essence of evil

Katerina cannot escape from the cage where she had imprisoned herself. She was completely dependent on Sergey's love. She had committed horrible crimes "for him" [1, p. 54] as she confessed with indifference. Sergei was the only reason of her life: even her baby did not mean anything for her. She gave up her baby to her husband's sister and lived day by day only hoping to meet his lover. She refused Sergei's new attitude, his calling "nonsense" their life "after all this suffering" [1, p. 56]. Her firm answer was "But I don't care, Sergey, as long as I can see you" [1, p. 56].

Although she was possessed by her love for him, she felt humiliated by his bitter words "Instead of coming to hide in corners with me it would be better to give the money to me and not the sergeant" [1, p. 56]. She was his slave and was miserably aware of such condition when "tears of rage" [1, p. 56] appeared on her eyes during their secret meetings. She continued the tiring game of feeling "offended", "angry", "Jealous"[1, p. 60, 50] and the urge to find the way of "reconciliation" [1, p. 60] with Sergey together with dirty "negotiations" to meet him in secret. She continued deceiving herself calling him "my own bad boy", "through her tears" [1, p. 61].

Katerina's forced desperately herself to continue her love affair even though she felt "exhausted by the march and the bad weather" [1, p. 63]. Anyway, the end of her weary sufferings was approaching in the moment "a man's heavy hand lashed across her back" [1, p. 63]. She could not dominate anymore the fury of anger and humiliations accumulated: "There was no limit to the malice that boiled at that moment in Katerina's Lvovna's soul" [1, p. 64]. First, she collapsed "she dropped unconscious", then she recovered "she exhausted her tears" and finally fell in the

deepest depressive status of existence: apathy that changes a living creature into a “stone” [1, p. 64]. The march was going to continue at the sound of drums and Katerina was “ready for the roll-call” “with an immobile countenance” [1, p. 64]. In such circumstances she had become a prey of a brutal nature where the “very essence of evil” [1, p. 65] its nest.

The fury of evil in the tempest of self-destruction

The essence of evil has its habitat in the wild darkness of human soul. Leskov gives a picture of the most terrific natural view with an abundance of adjectives and details, which make the natural scene alive. The brutality of nature is a perfect mirror to reflect the utmost human desperation.

“It was the most sorrowful of sights: a handful of people removed from the world and deprived of any hope of a better future, plodded their way through the thick, black mud of dirt road. Their whole surroundings were horrible in their ugliness: the endless mud, the grey sky, the wet, leafless willows and the tousled crows that sat on their gaunt branches. The wind groaned and its fury roared and howled” [1, p. 64]. Nobody could escape from such brutality. The dark side of human “bestiality” [1, p. 65] would prevail and come out with all its brutal essence. Katerine is one of the crowd and marches in the mud like an “automaton” [1, p. 66].

Then the scene moves on the “dark ferry” surrounded by the “waves of the raging river” [1, p. 66]. Nature continues taking part to human tragedy with colours and sounds, as it was alive. Katerina’s appearance is more and more the personification of evil: “Her heart was on fire; the pupils of her eyes were widely distended, burning as they gazed intently at the passing waves” [1, p. 67].

The world outside still continues humiliating her calling her “Mrs. Merchant” [1, p. 65-67] more than once, but Katerina “did not attempt to defend herself” [1, p. 67]. Nonetheless, until the last moment she tries to fight against the menacing waves of the Volga in front of her, but there was no “prayer” she could remember. The only words she could mutter recalled memories of “long autumn nights” mixed with the horror of crimes committed. She tried, in a last desperate gesture, to escape from the fury of evil, which was going to break out “her arms once or twice stretched out

nobody knew where into space and then dropped to her sides again” [1, p. 68]. No painter could ever have represented human desperation in such a worst deep darkness with not even a little spark of light far away. There was no possible future, no comfort for Katerina.

Job’s wife words are terribly recalled by Leskov on the scene of a tragic destiny: “Curse the day thou was born, and die” [1, p. 64]. Katerina was possessed by “something still more ugly”, than “simple bestiality” [1, p. 65]. In a minute Katerina was performing the last act of her existence: “Another minute and she swayed and, without taking her eyes out the dark waters, bent down, caught Sonia by the legs and with one single leap went overboard with her” [1, p. 68]. Sonia, her rival and she were the last victims of a serial of crimes. “Two seconds later... both of them went under” [1, p. 68].

Katerina’s, after a tiring and desperate struggle to escape from the cage where she had imprisoned herself for five long years had collapsed in the meanders of conflicts between past, present and future. Lady Macbeth remained victim of herself on the final scene of terror.

Final comments on the tale

I have read “Lady Makbeth of Mtsensk District” more than once with an incredible growing interest in understanding the *enigmatic* character that is Katerina. Later I have been able to watch some old movies inspired to the tale and made my considerations.

I have found movies mainly focused on the intricate story of two lovers involved in terrible crimes. The main character, Katerina is introduced as a young woman yawning about her house in solitude, but the passage from Katerina’s free simple childhood to her oppressive adult life as a married woman is missing.

Quite good the presentation of the Russian social background in the 19th century, in particular the women’s conditions. Katerina’s tragedy is widely presented reporting the convicts’ sufferings during the march in Siberia and her desperation on the ferry. Very interesting the procession in the night of the monstrous murder of the child: terrific the contrast between the sacred and the sinful.

The movies are very valuable for scenes and costumes, which can be well appreciated by people who live so far from a land so wide and rich with natural beauties and traditions.

Leskov, anyway, gave a picture of contemporary Russian society in a literary form which goes further deeply inside a reality you can see from outside.

Obviously, a reading of the tale in mother tongue would allow the reader to enjoy further more Leskov's richness and creativity in the use of the language.

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